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ABSTRACT

Ways parents can help their teenagers succeed in school are offered by teachers in the Minnetonka (Minnesota) Public Schools. Sections of the parent guide concern: (1) encouragement--encouraging the student through generous praise, encouraging best efforts, communicating love, making education a family priority, avoiding pressuring the teen, refusing to communicate low expectations, showing interest in schoolwork, and assisting in setting goals; (2) organization--helping teenagers organize their school work by expecting responsibility, scheduling study time, keeping track of assignments, giving the right help with homework, providing a study place, providing materials for organizing work, and supporting 100 percent attendance; (3) teamwork--communicating with and participating in the school and its programs, encouraging teamwork between the home and school; and (4) coping with challenges--staying friends with teenage children, becoming involved in parent support groups, monitoring eating and sleeping habits, evaluating the value of television, keeping extracurricular activities in perspective, monitoring the noise level in the home, and weighing the benefits of part-time employment. (RH)

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YES YOU CAN ...

Help Your Teenager Succeed in School

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A parent is the most important person in a child's life. When your son is younger, he might not admit it. When your daughter is younger, she might not be aware of it. But it's true.

Your influence affects your teenager's behavior and ideas even when you're not around--when she's with her friends, when he's in school.

Many parents ask teachers how they can help their children succeed in school. Most families are doing a fine job already. Some may need fresh ideas, or encounter conflicting advice, or lack confidence about the impact they can have.

The suggestions on the following pages are offered by Minnetonka teachers, most of whom are parents themselves. The ideas are not rules, but observations and examples of what has worked for others.

This booklet is presented because we believe in the importance of education to your child's future. We want each young person's experience in school to be happy, productive and successful.

101 WAYS TO ENCOURAGE YOUR TEEN

What's the most important "school supply" a young person can bring to school? A "can do" attitude!

To be successful in school or in anything else, your teenager has to believe he's capable of doing a good job. You can teach your youngster that he's competent by giving him opportunities to succeed--at jobs large and small. The confidence your child develops will carry over into his schoolwork.

Be generous with praise

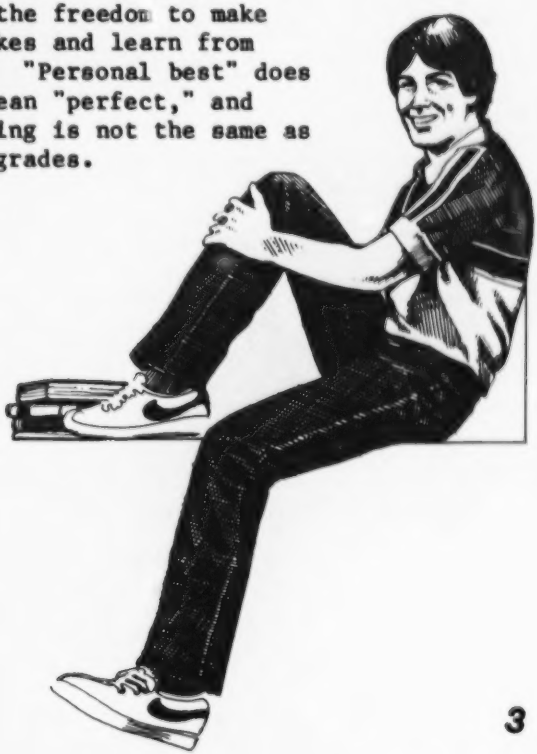
Go out of your way to compliment your child on her efforts. A rule of thumb one mother uses is five positives for each criticism. That means the more a young person does wrong, the more you must find to praise. Don't be insincere, but look carefully for things she does right that you can comment on.

The flip-side is to be stingy with criticism. Try this: If your teen doesn't do a job just right, don't comment on the results. Instead, when it's time to do the job again, talk about your expectations before she starts work.

Encourage "personal best"

What attracts thousands of runners to a race that only one person can win? It's the desire to improve on one's PR -- personal record. Most of the time, a runner races against herself, trying to learn just what she's capable of doing. You can help your student by encouraging this attitude of doing her "personal best" in school, home activities and recreation.

One caution: both children and adults must have the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them. "Personal best" does not mean "perfect," and learning is not the same as high grades.



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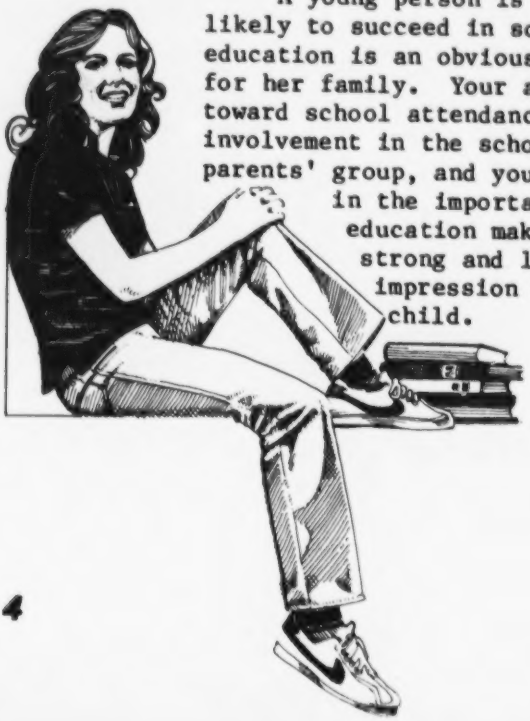
Say "I love you" many ways

1. Spend time with your child, doing what he wants to do.
2. Give honest praise in the presence of others.
3. Show physical affection.
4. Say "I'm sorry" when you are.
5. Forgive when he hurts or disappoints you.
6. Say "I love you" often.
7. Take time to listen.
8. Respect your child's opinions.
9. Let gifts be symbols, not proofs, of love.

Let your priorities show



A young person is much more likely to succeed in school if education is an obvious priority for her family. Your attitude toward school attendance, your involvement in the school parents' group, and your belief in the importance of education make a strong and lasting impression on your child.

Avoid pressuring your teen

What's the difference between healthy encouragement and destructive academic pressure?

Often it's in what a parent and teen are using as the measure of accomplishment. Pressure results from comparing a person against others. Encouragement is inspiring a young person to perform to the standard of his "personal best."

But before you say "You can get better grades," be sure you have a realistic appraisal of your teenager's ability. And try to have a few specific suggestions for how your child can do better:

- Reading the assignment when it's given;
- Keeping a list of new vocabulary;
- Proofreading to catch errors before writing a final draft;
- Outlining a chapter to prepare for class, or
- Reviewing notes before a test.

Keep skeletons in the closet

Your teenager may get his brains from his mother and his good looks from his father, but he's also a unique individual. If you want your youngster to succeed, please don't supply excuses like "I was never any good at math either," when he's having trouble. If you communicate to your teenager that you don't expect him to overcome obstacles, he's likely to give up without trying.

Show interest in schoolwork

Talk about school each day--pleasant things that happened, new ideas and facts, and your student's opinions. Encourage your young person to discuss new ideas and defend her opinions. Ask to see classwork, and express your pride in her increasingly mature thoughts and skills.

Don't allow yourself to outgrow this family tradition as your child gets older and busier. Junior and senior high students write some mighty interesting papers and reports; they study material that wasn't even invented when you were in school! Continue to show your interest and appreciation.

Help set goals

Achieving a goal is satisfying, no matter what a person's age. At the beginning of each quarter or semester, you can ask your teen to identify three or four goals. Post the goals where your young adult can refer to them often, as a reminder of what he's aiming for.

Be sure the goals are more specific than just grades, perhaps:

"Get assignments in on time,"
"Lick my problem with their/there/they're,"
"Make at least one comment in each class discussion," or
"Ask for help from the teacher right away in math if I become confused."

HELP YOUR TEEN GET ORGANIZED

Some young people seem to be naturally organized. It's easy for them to finish work on time--even early. They always have papers and pencils when needed. Not surprisingly, they're often the most successful students.

If you have a student who needs a little help to develop a school routine, here are some things you can do. A degree of organization can be learned, just like any other good habit.

Expect responsibility

Encourage your teenager to plan out a daily routine and stick to it. Make her responsible for bringing the right books, equipment and supplies to classes and activities. Don't train your child to rely on you to run to school with what she's forgotten.

Schedule study time

Post a family calendar that schedules study time and school project deadlines as well as softball practice, parties and dentist appointments. Be sure your student reserves necessary study time, rather than fitting it in after all other activities.

Be aware of mid-term dates, exam periods and report card deadlines. Keep a copy of the school calendar handy, so you can avoid time-consuming family obligations when your youngster's workload is apt to be heavy.

Keep track of assignments

Turning in assignments on time is a hallmark of the successful student, and an assignment book is the key.

Every student benefits from writing down all assignments and the dates they're due. Checking this assignment list regularly will help you to keep track of your child's work and to schedule family activities.

Give the right help with homework

What kind of help should parents give with homework?

- Offer to drill before a quiz or test, or listen to lines your teen must memorize. In both cases, be sure your youngster has studied the material alone first.

- Proofread first drafts of essays and reports. Most teachers prefer that you locate mistakes but ask your child to correct them. Check with the teacher before you make corrections yourself.

- Listen when your teenager wants to talk about a difficult passage in a composition. Take notes while he talks. Many students can work out a writing problem by describing it out loud.

- Help with the outline of a project or essay, and offer suggestions for clarification or logical sequence.

- Listen to your student practice for an oral report.

- If your teen has problems organizing, suggest that he put away each set of materials when he's finished with them for the night.

- Show your student how to break down large projects into manageable parts. If a project is due in three weeks, he should set up deadlines for preliminary work, a first draft, and a final draft. This guidance is essential, until your youngster gets some experience in estimating the amount of time it takes to finish a big job.

From seventh grade on, if your youngster isn't doing some schoolwork every night, do some careful checking with him and his teachers. Most nights, junior and senior high school students are expected to have enough class work to require at least an hour and a half of homework. Encourage daily review of notes and materials, rather than cramming for tests.

Getting the most out of classes often depends on careful reading of an assignment in preparation for a class. Help your student understand that reading assignments are just as important homework as something that must be turned in. The young person who relies on class discussions or last minute perusal of the textbook before a test is really at a disadvantage.

Provide a study place

Provide your youngster with a desk or table in a quiet place for studying and doing homework. Add a bright study lamp and a comfortable chair.

Getting down to business is difficult for some young people. You can eliminate a lot of wasted time by stocking supplies in the desk: paper, pencils, pens, ruler, tape and stapler.

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Another kind of supply is also an asset to the successful student: reference books. We recommend a paperback dictionary, atlas, thesaurus and almanac.

Keeping noise down around your teen's study place is also a great help to a student. Perhaps the whole family can do quiet activities at the same time. In any case, establish a time when the TV will be kept off and phone messages taken.

For some thoughts on that age-old issue "Can a teenager really learn anything with the radio on?" see page 23.

Provide materials for organizing

The most successful students keep materials for each subject separate. Some like three-ring notebooks with a folder inside for each subject.

Others prefer to manage their papers by keeping a color-matched folder and spiral notebook for each class. The color-coding reduces mistakes when students are racing for class or the bus.

Whatever system your youngster likes, provide the supplies and then expect them to be used.

At home, supply your student with file folders so he can save papers in each subject. The file will yield concrete evidence of your child's progress throughout the year. The papers are also a reliable tip-off to what the teacher considers most important, so they're a good place to start studying for tests. Some papers are worth saving from year to year, to help in advanced courses.

Support 100 percent attendance

Although teachers do their best to help students who have been absent catch up on what they've missed, often there's no way to make up adequately for the lively discussion, the dawning of an idea, or the shared struggle for an insight into a difficult problem. "I guess you had to be there" is true for school too.

Today's lesson builds on yesterday's, so your child is at a real disadvantage after an absence. When your youngster is absent, he misses work that will have to be made up when he returns, on top of current schoolwork.

Some kinds of absences are unavoidable, of course. But the trend toward taking students out of school for medical appointments, family vacations and even shopping trips has had a pronounced effect on education in the last ten years.

In addition, once you begin pulling your teen out of school, she may try to lengthen the list of "good reasons" for being absent to include a chance to work more hours, a ski trip to Colorado, or a farewell concert of her favorite rock star.

Remember that make-up work often must be done before or after school, so be prepared to provide transportation.

IT TAKES TEAMWORK

Communication is a two-way street. The school can send newsletters home, but teachers also need to hear from you if we're going to do the best job for your child. Your understanding of what the school is trying to accomplish is a prerequisite to giving your child the support he needs to succeed.

Help's nearby

Please urge your teenager to seek individual help from the teacher whenever she encounters difficulty. If the teacher's free time doesn't coincide with your child's, a meeting can be arranged before or after school. You can help by providing transportation to or from school if your youngster needs to see a teacher outside of class.

The teacher may be able to straighten things out by taking a new approach to the topic, or calling on other school staff to help, or suggesting ways you can help at home.

Use our special services

Several special services are available at school to help meet the needs of your child. The school office will refer you to a social worker, chemical dependency coordinator or counselor for vocational, career or college guidance.

Call teachers

When you have a question or comment about school or your teenager's work, please call his teacher. We want to hear from you.

If the teacher is busy in class, the office will take your number and the teacher will return your call.

It's especially important to call if something your child says about school doesn't quite ring true. If you wonder if your student is giving you the straight scoop, call and check out the story. If something sounds too good to be true--or too outrageous to be true--it probably isn't.

We want to stay in touch with you, so we are in agreement about the best approach to working with your child.

Get involved

Attending school activities, open houses and parent/teacher conferences tells your teen that school is important to you. If your teen sees you involved, it's more likely that school will be a priority for her.

Another way you can demonstrate your commitment to education is to become a school volunteer. You'll make a valuable contribution to school life, and you'll learn about your youngster's school from the inside.

Parent involvement is extremely popular in elementary schools. Please don't "drop out" as your child grows older. And don't believe any moans and groans you may hear about "You're not really coming to school today, are you?" We've seen how even the "coolest" students beam when someone comments about their parents' activities around the school. (Don't worry about having to be in the same room as your own child. You can easily be assigned to other areas.)

COPING WITH CHALLENGES

Stay friends with your teenager

Don't--DON'T--retreat from your child's life when he becomes a teenager. Yes, friends become more important. Yes, your child will demand more freedom and privacy. But he still needs your friendship, support and caring.

Meet your teenager on his own ground. Find out what interests him--and share it. If it's high school football games, go to them. Your child may not sit with you, but you'll have something to talk about with him Saturday morning. Challenge your youngster to a tennis match--or to doubles with another parent-child team. Take a class together. Work on the lawn together, instead of separately.

If the gulf has already started to widen--bridge it. It's never too late to begin--or resume--doing things with your child.

Form a parent network

"Everybody does it," says your child.

No, everybody doesn't do it. But you'll never know for sure unless you talk to other parents.

Whether you visit with other parents over the back fence or have organized monthly meetings, parent support groups are an effective way of dealing with the responsibilities of being a parent.

Some groups have been formed by parents of children with chemical abuse problems. Others have developed among parents who want to prevent problems. They may set common rules for their youngsters. They may organize activities that are an alternative to questionable parties or recreational activities their children want to attend.

Past networks in our area have established rules on topics such as these:

- School night and weekend curfews
- Youngsters' responsibility to let parents know where they are at all times
- Adult chaperones at all parties
- No drinking and driving
- No overnights without communication between parents
- No party-crashing

Monitor eating, sleeping habits

In our experience:

1. Too many children succumb to the taste-temptations of junk food and the time-temptations of late-night TV to trust their judgment on health habits.

2. Setting limits is a sign of love, which children appreciate at the same time they're arguing against them.

3. A youngster may not be hungry for breakfast before school, but the same person will have trouble concentrating in school from 9 to noon because his energy level is low.

Please set and enforce good health habits. They'll pay off for your teenager.

Evaluate the value of TV

The average American child watches television five hours a day, or 1,825 hours a year.

Protect your child's reading, studying and activity time by controlling the television.

You might consider time limits, or keeping the TV off until after homework is completed. Or you can schedule special programs into your family calendar, but limit total TV time. Some families use TV as an incentive, letting children earn TV hours with chores or well-done schoolwork.

Keep activities in proportion

Sports, after-school classes and music lessons are all beneficial activities. However, your child's schoolwork can suffer if she doesn't have plenty of time to devote to it, plus a healthy dose of unscheduled time for relaxing, phoning and socializing.

Please watch your teen's schedule carefully, so that she doesn't become harried and pressured. Communicate clearly that school is the top priority. If a parent doesn't help protect study time, it can easily be whittled away.

"Turn down that..."

Can a teenager really learn while the radio's blasting?

If your youngster says he concentrates better with music in the background, what he means is that he's in the habit of studying with music on.

What can you do? Try phasing out the music over a week or two by turning down the volume a little at a time. If your child complains about needing the music to drown out the TV or people's talking, examine the noise level in your household. Perhaps you can designate quiet places or quiet times.

Weigh the gain in "gainfully employed"

A majority of high school students have part-time jobs, averaging about 20 hours a week, according to a recent survey.

These jobs help students develop self-confidence, learn job skills and gain a better understanding of the working world--plus earn spending money.

However, devoting this much time to a job means that teenagers have less time for other activities--and often it's their schoolwork that suffers.

Be sure that your teenager's job is governed by your family's priorities. If your youngster aims for college, studies are important--more important in the long run than the stereo he is working to buy or the car he is trying to support. If a young person wants to begin a career straight out of high school, make him aware that an employer may value performance in vocational courses more highly than hundreds of hours of minimum-wage work.

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